



Break for Recovery

by John Owen

Over a 25-year career in media and advertising, I've witnessed the obliteration of natural downtime. Thanks to mass, mobile connectivity, we are now empowered in lots of ways, with near-permanent access to information and resources; but we are also enslaved – since chief amongst those resources is each other. *Hence, we are always on call. And there is no excuse not to be always on the go.*

Recently, psychologists including [Charlotte Fritz](#) and [Sabine Sonnentag](#) have investigated whether breaks from work are important. Their initial focus was on breaks outside of the working day – switching off in the evenings, at weekends and while on holiday. The benefits of this for energy and well-being have been pretty conclusively established by these studies.

Partly in consequence, we are now seeing employer attitudes and policies changing – for example, [Daimler](#), [Volkswagen](#), [Huffington Post](#) and the [Wieden & Kennedy](#) advertising agency are amongst those who have restricted access to email during downtime.

But much less research has been conducted into the effects of breaks *during the working day*. The study I conducted for my Masters dissertation attempts to help redress this.

The main findings from studies undertaken in this area so far identify two key factors in promoting recovery: the pursuit of *relaxing* break activities and the *autonomous* choice of break activities. But it is not clear which is the primary factor.

Some theories (e.g. [Conservation of Resources Theory](#) by Hobfoll and [Ego Depletion Theory](#) by Baumeister and colleagues), supported by some empirical findings (e.g. Trougakos et al, [2008](#) and [2014](#)), hold that recovery occurs by resting the mental resources needed for work.



Other theories (e.g. **Self Determination Theory** by Ryan and Deci), supported by other empirical findings (e.g. **Hunter & Wu, 2015**), hold that autonomy moderates recovery. They maintain that recovery can be generated not just by relaxing, but also by taking part in alternative effortful activities – as long as the subject considers these to be motivating and preferable to his or her main work task. For example, helping others has been shown to be beneficial in many different contexts.

My study aimed to find out whether relaxation or autonomy was the most important factor in driving recovery via in-work breaks. In a lab experiment, I administered two back-to-back, 20-minute work tasks to all participants. To one randomly assigned group, I mandated a 5-minute relaxation break in between the tasks, which involved listening to classical music. I instructed a second group to use their 5-minute break to do something pro-social – helping future students, by answering a questionnaire about life in London. Meanwhile, those in the control condition received no break. Before each task, I asked the participants for their energy levels, and I then analysed whether the breaks had caused energy levels to recover.

My key finding was that relaxation works, even in the absence of autonomy. In the relaxation condition, energy levels returned almost to their starting position after the break, while those in the control group recorded a dip that was significantly different from this, at a confidence level of 99%.

The pro-social group recorded a lesser dip than the control group, but this difference was only marginally significant. More research is therefore required to ascertain whether autonomy is necessary for pro-social activities to have a recovery effect.

For employers, the key finding gives some licence for workplace interventions. If a lack of autonomy does not override the recovery effects of relaxation, then it follows that there may be a place for policies and processes that encourage and, in some circumstances, even mandate the taking of breaks.

Meanwhile, for researchers, there is much still to do, not least testing these findings in a field setting.

This blog post was written by John Owen as a summary of the research undertaken for his dissertation as part of the Executive MSc in Behavioural Science at LSE, 2015-16. John is the founding director of the Decision Practice, a behavioural management consultancy. Follow him on twitter @johnowen1966 or on linkedin <https://www.linkedin.com/in/johnowen2/>

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